

977.5
W75chr

16

ILLINOIS HISTORICAL SURVEY

THE WISCONSIN LABOR STORY

James I. Clark

The State Historical Society of Wisconsin

THE WISCONSIN LABOR STORY

by

James I. Clark



The State Historical Society of Wisconsin
Madison, 1956

Copyright 1956
by
The State Historical Society of Wisconsin

9772
1070000

200 428.5000

THE WISCONSIN LABOR STORY

64

JAMES I. CLARK

ACTION FOR THE FIRST OF May 1886 had been carefully planned. In big cities throughout the nation more than 300,000 workers were prepared to march or go on strike. The objective: an 8 hour day with 10 hours' pay—which in many cases amounted to \$1.50. Labor had long agitated for this reform. Now workers would force the issue.

Milwaukee labor groups joined the demonstrations. Reported the *Sentinel* on May 3:

The steady tramp of 3,000 workingmen kept time with martial music in the streets of Milwaukee yesterday forenoon, and many transparencies, flags, banners and mottoes proclaimed to the crowds on the sidewalks that the hour of deliverance had come. Overhead the sun shone brightly in a clear sky, and below the dust had been laid sufficient to make the streets as good as the sidewalks.

"The Workingman Does Not Beg, He Demands" read one crudely lettered banner. "We Have Come to the Cross-roads. Honest Workmen Will Follow the Way. Mark the Rats. Eight Hours." read another. And bringing up the rear of the parade was a boy on horseback with his sign: "Baseball Today."

The parade was orderly, as were those in many cities. Yet before this

show of labor unity had run its course, bombs would be thrown, shots fired, and people would lie dead and dying in the streets.

The Knights of Labor, most powerful labor organization in the country, took no official part in this 8 hour demonstration. Yet many of its members joined strikes and parades. More radical organizations of Socialist and Anarchists also were involved, noisily and with great determination.

Plant after plant was closed in Milwaukee as workers left their jobs. On May 1, over 6,000 employes were out. Two days later a mob moved on the Falk Brewery and persuaded workers there to join the demonstration. Frank R. Falk wired Governor Jeremiah M. Rusk for help. The state militia wasn't called out, however. Local police for the moment felt able to handle any trouble that might come.

On May 3, as workers marched on Falk's brewery, a mob stormed the McCormick Reaper Works in Chicago. Police were called, clubs swung and shots were fired. Four people died. Strike leaders called a mass meeting for the next night in Haymarket Square.

Next day over 15,000 men were off their jobs in Milwaukee. Strikes were popping up so fast newspapers couldn't keep count. Practically

every industry in the city was paralyzed and a number of plants had been damaged.

Now the Milwaukee County sheriff decided he needed help. He wired the governor:

I find it impossible with the force at my disposal to preserve the peace of the county and protect the property from destruction on account of the unlawful assemblage of crowds of men caused by disturbances growing out of the labor troubles. Therefore I call upon you to afford me such assistance as may be necessary to preserve the peace in this emergency.

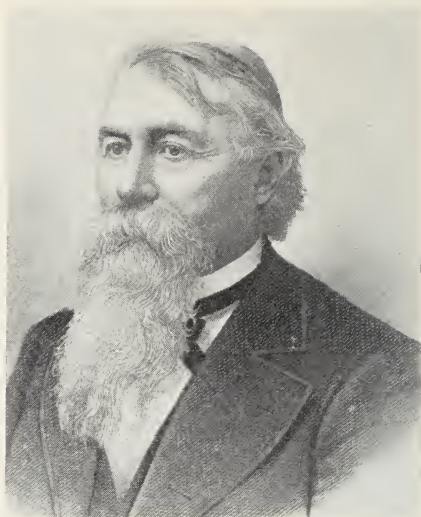
Governor Rusk hurried to Milwaukee. Troops were called out.

Rumors circulated that night. A mob would try to destroy the Illinois Steel Company mill at Bay View, just outside Milwaukee, closed the day before.

That same night, in Chicago's Haymarket Square, someone tossed a bomb into a company of policemen. The police opened fire, members of the crowd shot back and a shock of Anarchist terror spread over the country.

Early next morning, six militia companies took positions at the Bay View plant. Then came the mob, brandishing sticks, stones and knives. Ordered to halt, the mass of men pressed on. The commander ordered the troops to fire. Nine people died. The crowd dispersed.

At other places in Milwaukee, that day and the next, soldiers broke up crowds, shots were fired and the situation remained tense. Some strike leaders were arrested and later fined or imprisoned. They were convicted



Jeremiah M. Rusk

of taking part in strikes and violence, although many probably had no part in the disturbances. Gradually then, men went back to work.

The fact that labor had a real grievance was generally forgotten in the fear generated by mass strike action. Most people applauded Rusk's use of force and that later helped him get reelected governor.

Labor was understandably bitter about the militia action. Wrote Robert Schilling, Wisconsin Knights of Labor leader: "The fire was unjustified and cruel and to say it in plain German, it was cowardly, premeditated murder."¹

Although the events of May 1886 contributed to the decline of the Knights of Labor and some other labor organizations, the success in getting unified action in so many cities demonstrated labor strength. The trip that far had been long and hard. It had begun almost 100 years before.

Labor Background

Until the rise of the factory system there had been little need for labor unions. Employers and employees worked closely together in small shops and had similar interests. Early associations of workers were mainly for mutual aid. General societies of mechanics and tradesmen in New York, Massachusetts and other states about the time of the Revolution were formed to help sick or injured workers and to care for widows and orphans.

As small shops gave way to larger wholesale businesses employer-employee interests grew further apart. More and more, workers organized for economic ends. They wanted better working conditions, shorter hours, higher wages and tighter control over apprenticeships. In the early 19th century, demands for the abolition of imprisonment for debt and the elimination of compulsory militia service, both of which worked hardships on workers, were added.

During the 1820s and 1830s the 10 hour day became an issue. It was hard to convince many people, however, that the factory workers should be treated differently from the farmer, who worked from dawn to sunset.

Employers were certainly not impressed with the need for a shorter day. When Boston carpenters demanded a 10 hour day in 1825, the masters noted, "We learn with surprise and regret that a large number of those who are employed as journeymen in this city have entered into a combination for the purpose of altering the time of commencing and terminating their daily labor, from that which has been customary from

time immemorial." Such action, thought the masters, was "fraught with numerous and pernicious evils." Many years of hard fighting were necessary before labor gained the 10 hour objective.

By 1830 most states had universal manhood suffrage and workingmen's parties formed to achieve labor's aims through political action. A number of labor newspapers also sprang up. Labor parties worked for increased public education, changes in tax laws, mechanics' lien laws and other reforms. They attracted some attention and elected a few members to state legislatures.

Some objectives were gained. Many states expanded their educational systems, others outlawed imprisonment for debt and compulsory militia service was reduced or abolished. The working day remained long however, and wages low.

The Panic of 1837 brought depression, fewer jobs and a decline in union strength. During the 1840s labor left unionization to join many reform movements of the day. Abolition, temperance, feminism, as well as utopian societies advocated by Robert Owen and Charles Fourier got support from labor leaders. These helped the workingman little however and certainly didn't gain him important economic objectives such as higher wages.

Not until the 1850s did labor shake free from these movements and get back to straight trade union work. During that decade an emphasis on associations of skilled workers, rather than organization regardless of trades, began. Some strong unions were formed, such as the National

Typographical and the National Molders'. When the cost of living increased during the Civil War and business was generally prosperous, these groups were able to win strikes for higher wages.²

In Wisconsin

When the Civil War came, Wisconsin was still an agricultural state. Yet industrialization had progressed far enough for labor to be a factor in cities such as Milwaukee. As the cost of living went up, workers demanded wages better than the \$1.50 per day generally paid.

Wisconsin printers, locomotive engineers, iron workers and others had formed unions during the late 1850s. Cigarmakers organized in 1860. Many unions struck for higher wages and in many cases were successful. Usually employers agreed to demands rather than interrupt profitable wartime production.

Increased use of machinery during and after the war caused problems that couldn't be solved merely with wage increases, however. Shoemakers and coopers were hard hit in Wisconsin, as elsewhere, and took united action to combat technological change.

Milwaukee shoemakers in 1867 formed the Knights of St. Crispin to resist the trend toward greater mechanization of the trade and to control apprenticeship training. The movement spread rapidly to Racine, Janesville, Portage, Oshkosh and other cities. Early strikes to enforce demands had some success, but shoemakers could not forever stand in the path of labor-saving machinery. By 1872 the Knights of St. Crispin were about finished.

In the barrelmaking industry, stave manufacturing machinery left skilled workers with little to do but assemble the barrels. Coopers organized, struck for higher rates per barrel and during war times got what they wanted. When business declined after the war, strikes were less successful.³

The Knights of Labor

Low wages, however, remained the primary problem during and after the war. Some workers saw an opportunity for improvement in a shorter day. Over the years hours had generally been reduced to ten. Now came a further step.

Before war's end, agitation for the 8 hour day invaded Wisconsin. Workers argued that a shorter day—with 10 hours' pay—would give them more income to buy and more leisure to use manufactured goods, thus increasing production and profits. The same argument had been used in connection with the 10 hour day. Employers were no more impressed now than they had been before. Neither were farmers.

"If labor can secure ten hours' pay for eight hours' work," said the Milwaukee *Sentinel* in 1867, "it would be an injustice to the great overwhelming mass of agricultural workers, which works longer than 8 hours a day, for it would raise the price of manufactured goods which this class consumes."

The Wisconsin legislature passed an 8 hour law in 1867, but it benefited no one. Eight hours was to be a legal day's work, unless employers and employees had a contract to the contrary. E. P. Allis, Milwaukee industrialist, offered his men an 8 hour

day. He also offered 8 hours' pay. Employees were not enthusiastic.

One organization supporting the 8 hour movement was the Knights of Labor. Organized by a Philadelphia tailor named Uriah S. Stephens in 1869, the Knights embraced both skilled and unskilled workers. It grew rapidly, in spite of the bitter and unsuccessful railroad and coal strikes of the 1870s.

Robert Schilling, K of L organizer, began work in Milwaukee in 1878. Ten years later there were over fifty lodges and more than 16,000 members in that city. There were half again as many in the rest of the state.

The Knights of Labor reached their peak of power in 1884, when they won a railroad strike in the southwestern part of the United States. After the 8 hour strikes two years later, the organization lost popular support and membership steadily declined.⁴

The WSFL and Milwaukee Socialists

The Knights declined in numbers and influence but many individual trade unions survived and slowly increased their strength. These formed the basis of a new organization, one that was to survive many severe tests and grow very powerful. This was the AFL.

The man behind the AFL was New York cigarmaker Samuel Gompers, born on London's East Side in 1850. First AFL president, he inspired and guided the organization from its beginning in December 1886 until his death in 1924.

Intimate friend of Gompers and an equally tireless union organizer



Frank J. Weber, WSFL General Organizer, 1893-1917

was Frank J. Weber. Wisconsin-born in 1847, Weber became a carpenter and in his early 20s was a sailor on merchant ships. In a short time he was deeply involved in the labor movement, organizing seamen, brewery workers and other trades for the Knights of Labor.

In 1887 Weber organized the Milwaukee Federated Trades Council and took it into the AFL. Six years later, as a result of his persistent and successful work, Wisconsin became the fifth state to receive a charter for a state federation of labor.

The Wisconsin State Federation of Labor became the central organization for trade unions about the state. Printers, seamen, cigarmakers and carpenters were represented at the 1893 organizational meeting in Milwaukee. With WSFL help a number of locals in other trades were formed. In Fond du Lac, for example, cigar-



Victor Berger

makers had unionized in 1891. That group, along with carpenters, tailors, painters, printers and woodworkers set up a Trade and Labor Council in 1901. A similar council was established in Kenosha the following year, with bakers, barbers, carpenters, machinists, electrical workers, musicians, plumbers and other trades represented. All these groups became members of the WSFL.

Although the WSFL was to follow national AFL lines generally, it had its unique aspects. It took a more active part in politics than did the parent organization. And it early became connected, although unofficially, with the Socialist party in Milwaukee.

Milwaukee was the largest industrial center of the state. Many of its citizens had come from Germany. A number of them belonged to the Socialist party.

Victor Berger, who became one of Wisconsin's best known party leaders,

arrived in the United States in 1878 from Austria-Hungary. Soon after the 8 hour strikes in 1886, he joined the Socialist movement in Milwaukee. He also began publishing the *Wisconsin Vorwärts*, and rapidly climbed to party leadership. Berger has been given credit for converting labor leader Eugene Debs to Socialism while Debs sat out a jail sentence after the unsuccessful Pullman strike of 1894.

Under Berger's leadership Socialists grew more active in Milwaukee politics. In 1904 they elected some members of the city council and captured a few county offices. Then in 1910, campaigning for clean and honest government—which Milwaukee hadn't seen for some time—the party elected Emil Seidel mayor. Socialists also won a majority on the city council. Victor Berger was sent to Congress that year, the first of his party to be elected to a national office. He was to be reelected to four more terms before his death in 1929. In addition, the party placed 2 senators and 12 assemblymen in the legislature.

Two years after the Socialist victory in Milwaukee, a Democrat-Republican combination defeated Seidel. The party didn't come back strong until 1916, when Daniel Hoan became mayor. Although he remained in the office until 1940, Hoan never enjoyed a Socialist majority on the city council.

While favoring government ownership of production transportation and utilities, Milwaukee Socialists did little to disturb the capitalistic system once they gained power. That would have been rather difficult in a

single city anyway. The party became known principally for good municipal government, much to the chagrin and disgust of more radical Socialists in the country. These felt that Berger and the Milwaukee party had sold out to the capitalist enemy.

In municipal and later in state elections, Socialist candidates received strong labor support. The WSFL itself was Socialist-oriented. The preamble to its constitution, for example, called for public ownership of all essential industries. Early leaders, such as Frank Weber and Frederick Brockhausen (long time secretary-treasurer) were prominent in the Socialist party. These men, after 1900, were elected to the state legislature under the party label. Yet WSFL leaders were unionists first and Socialists second and were mainly interested in furthering the cause of Wisconsin labor.⁵

New Laws

One way of doing that was to work for favorable state laws. The WSFL early gave attention to that objective. Each annual convention passed resolutions favoring certain laws. Labor representatives attended legislative sessions and lobbied to get bills passed.

As the 19th century drew to a close the amount and effectiveness of Wisconsin labor legislation was increasing. Yet the results were meager compared to the number of important laws passed during the latter part of the Progressive era.

In 1883 a Bureau of Labor Statistics was established. Later its duties were expanded to include enforcement of all labor laws and factory inspectors were appointed. Safety



Daniel Hoan

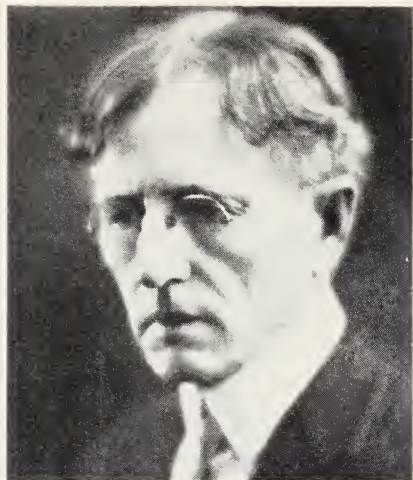
laws, requiring fire escapes in manufacturing plants and guards on dangerous machinery, were passed.

During the 1890s a State Board of Arbitration was set up to help handle labor disputes. Laws regulating private employment agencies were also enacted.

Children were excluded from certain dangerous jobs in 1877, but no officials were provided to enforce the law. In 1889, by law, children age 14 to 16 couldn't work more than 10 hours a day or 60 hours a week while school was in session.

One important labor gain was made in 1899 when the yellow dog contract (agreement not to join a labor union) was outlawed. That advantage proved only temporary—the Wisconsin Supreme Court soon declared the law unconstitutional.

Progressive Republican victories in 1900 didn't result in immediate gains for labor. La Follette's program was



John R. Commons

aimed at farmers and small businessmen and he got most of his support from those groups. Labor leaders, particularly the Socialists, were suspicious of the new movement, for they didn't think labor would benefit greatly.

Yet when Progressivism turned toward the "service state" under Governor Francis B. McGovern from 1910 to 1914, a great deal of labor legislation was enacted. The 1911 legislature set up a system of vocational education. It established an industrial commission and gave that agency broad powers to enforce labor laws. The legislature also passed new safety laws, workmen's compensation, and laws regulating the labor of women and children.

Much of this legislation was influenced by University of Wisconsin Professor John R. Commons. Commons wrote the workmen's compensation law and was one of the first three members of the Industrial Commission. He trained many graduate students in labor history and

economics and did much to make the University one of the foremost schools for labor studies in the United States.

Charles McCarthy of the Legislative Reference Library, University President Van Hise, and State Superintendent of Public Instruction C. P. Cary were equally interested in laws that would aid workingmen. These men worked together on the vocational education law. Under this legislation vocational schools were to be established in cities of over 5,000 population. Non-high school graduates under 16 who were working full time would attend these schools one-half day per week. (Later the age was raised to 18 and the time to one full day). Apprentices in the various trades would also attend to receive training relative to their jobs as well as take academic courses.

Over the years, as more and more people finished high school, vocational schools took on greater importance as centers of adult education. Adults could train for new jobs, prepare for advancement in their trades, or obtain greater benefits from leisure time activities.

The Industrial Commission established by the 1911 legislature was given power to enforce safety laws, hours of labor for women and children and to administer the workmen's compensation law.

Before this time an injured workman had to sue in court to obtain damages. He had to prove the accident had not been due to his or a fellow worker's negligence and wasn't a part of the risk he assumed in taking the job. Under these rules some workers collected; many did not.

Gradually state legislation removed these employer defenses. This made them more likely to accept compensation laws. In Wisconsin after 1911 an employer could come under the plan voluntarily (it wasn't required until 1931). Instead of a court case when injuries occurred, the Industrial Commission took over. It investigated accidents and awarded compensation according to a fixed scale for injuries or death.

Another law of that session limited women's day work to 55 hours per week and night work to 48 hours. In addition, a state life insurance fund was established.

Although Wisconsin labor had made much headway under the McGovern administration, its leaders didn't rest. With lobbying committees and legislative conferences they continued to press for more laws. Resolutions passed at WSFL conventions during World War I called for further protection for labor to organize, anti-injunction laws, laws against the contract system of prison labor and a shorter working day for all employees (the 8 hour day was still an issue).

At the same time, the WSFL set up a legal staff to handle labor problems. Joseph Padway, Milwaukee attorney, became labor council in 1915 and served until his death in 1947. Padway argued several labor cases before the Wisconsin and federal Supreme Courts and wrote many articles on labor law and its relation to rank and file union members. He also had a term in the state senate, elected to that body on the Socialist ticket in 1924.⁶



Joseph Padway

The 1920s

Labor made many important gains during the first two decades of the 20th century. Its cause was aided by government trust busting activity and by social reformers who pushed a lot of pro-labor legislation. On the national level the Clayton Act of 1914 exempted labor unions from anti-trust suits. The Adamson Act of 1916 gave railroad workers an 8 hour day. In return for a no-strike pledge after the United States entered World War I, labor was given federal government support to organize and bargain collectively. Wage increases were secured and union membership went up to nearly 5 million.

The post-war period was a different story. Business, after several years under attack by trust busters, muckrakers and reformers, regained prestige as a result of a superb war production job. After the war businessmen reasserted themselves to curb labor unions. At the same time,

government attitudes toward labor changed somewhat. In addition, the Red Scare of the early 'twenties and the radical IWW activity during the war and after helped cast general suspicion on all labor unions.

Post-war strikes for higher wages by coal miners and steel workers were unsuccessful. A 1922 railroad strike was broken with federal government force and injunctions.

To combat unionism many state and national employers' associations were formed. These groups worked to enforce the open shop and yellow dog contracts and lobbied for anti-picketing and anti-boycott laws. Injunctions, labor spies and strike-breakers were freely used by employers to hold down or stamp out labor organizations.

Further to counteract labor combinations, many employers established company unions. Profit-sharing and bonus plans, opportunities to buy stock, group health and life insurance and other plans were offered employees. All this made employees more dependent on the company and lessened the influence of labor unions. AFL membership dropped from a wartime 5 million to about 3.5 million.

Seeing no possibility for help from either the Republican or Democratic parties, the AFL for the first time in its history endorsed a particular political party. The support of all affiliated unions was thrown behind Wisconsin's Senator Robert M. La Follette in his bid for the presidency in 1924. The effort failed. La Follette carried only his home state, although he ran second in 11 others. He gained 4.8 million popular votes.



Henry Ohl, Jr., WSFL President,
1917-1940

Working for La Follette's election was not the extent of Wisconsin labor's political activity during the 1920s. Its leaders worked to elect friendly legislators and presented bills to improve the status of labor. Some gains were made.

Workmen's compensation payments were liberalized. Workers were granted more freedom to choose a doctor in compensation cases. Anti-labor activities of private detective agencies—important source of labor spies at the time—were limited by law. Women's maximum hours were reduced to a 9 hour day and a 50 hour week in many occupations. In 1929 the yellow dog contract was again outlawed. This time the law remained on the books.

Organized labor in Wisconsin helped itself in other ways. In 1922 Henry Ohl, Jr. and John J. Handley, president and secretary-treasurer of the WSFL, along with Jake F. Friedrich of the Milwaukee Federated Trades Council pioneered the Mil-

waukee Workers' College. Out of that grew the School for Workers, founded at the University of Wisconsin in 1925.

At first the School had only women students. Generalized 6 weeks courses in economic history and English were given. The School became co-educational in 1928 and began to deal with problems of specific interest to labor unions.

In later years the 6 weeks course was changed to one and two week institutes. Attendance climbed steadily. Courses such as union administration, labor movement history, collective bargaining and public speaking were added.

According to the first director, Ernest E. Schwartztrauber, the School for Workers was to do "for the workers what the School of Commerce does for the businessman and the School of Agriculture for the farmer in their extension activities—it meets his educational requirements at the point of most vital need."

The 1930s

Although unions lost membership and labor made few legal gains during the 'twenties, the picture changed during the next decade. The depression that began in 1929 caused much hardship, reduced wages, and loss of jobs. Yet it also ushered in a period of much union-promoting legislation on both state and national levels.

The Norris-LaGuardia Act of 1932 was followed by Section 7 (a) of the NIRA law. When the Supreme Court upset the NIRA, the Wagner Act was passed. That threw the full support of the federal government behind the unionization of labor.



John J. Handley, WSFL Secretary-Treasurer, 1912-1941

Wisconsin enacted similar laws. A labor code was passed in 1931. Union organizing and collective bargaining were promoted. Prohibitions against yellow dog contracts were repeated. The use of injunctions to break strikes was made more difficult and labor got the right to appeal injunctions in the courts.

In 1932 Wisconsin became the first state to pass an unemployment compensation law. This provided for employer contributions amounting to a small percentage of their total payroll. The state kept accounts and made necessary payments. When a man was laid off work he could apply for benefits. If eligible, he would receive a maximum of \$10 per week for 13 weeks. Later amendments increased the weekly amount and lengthened the total period of payment.

Protected by state and federal laws labor unions grew rapidly. Disagree-



Milwaukee Journal photo

Milwaukee CIO on the march in the 1930s

ments among AFL leaders over how to organize new unions resulted in the formation of the CIO under John L. Lewis in 1935. Main CIO strength in Wisconsin came from workers in the cities along Lake Michigan, such as auto workers and Allis-Chalmers employees. By 1940 CIO leaders claimed from 80,000 to 100,000 members in Wisconsin locals. The AFL at that time claimed around 200,000 and the four railroad brotherhoods had 18,000.

“White collar” labor unions also gained members during the 1930s. The American Federation of Teachers (AFL), for example, had organized at Chicago in 1916. Wisconsin locals were few and far between during the 'twenties but in the next decade the union grew rapidly.

Similarly, Wisconsin state, county and municipal employees, both office workers and others, organized during the depression years. At first, this civil service workers' group was part of the federal government employees' union. By 1935, though, with over 30-non-federal employees' locals in various states a movement grew to organize apart from the federal group. Next year an AFL international charter was granted to the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees. Headquarters was established in Madison, Wisconsin and Arnold S. Zander became the first international president. Membership rapidly increased to over 100,000 in the United States and Canada.⁸

Labor Trouble

Although the organization of many workers was quite peaceful, serious trouble occurred in some industries, particularly in steel and autos. Employers refused to recognize unions and bargain with their representatives. Sit down strikes and violence marked many disputes in the mid-1930s and the militia was called out in several states.

This was a period of strife and turmoil in Wisconsin, too. A 1937 "Little Wagner Act" established a State Labor Relations Board, modeled on the national agency. This was to investigate labor disputes and mediate between employers and employees. The Board soon had its hands full. "Far more strikes occurred in 1937 than in any previous years in the history of this state," it said in a biennial report. Summing up that year, the Board point out that

190 strikes occurred in Wisconsin involving more than 40,000 employees and causing a loss of more than 850,000 working days. In contrast, there occurred in 1936—also a year of more than the usual number of strikes—only fifty strikes involving 16,000 employees and causing a loss of 233,000 working days.

Yet, the report continued, there was bright side to the picture too, for

strikes in the main have been of short duration and have been terminated by agreements, usually representing a compromise settlement. Wisconsin has been very fortunate in having virtually no bloodshed in the very disturbed labor conditions which have prevailed during the last two years, . . . relatively slight destruction of

property, and not a single occasion on which anyone even requested that the militia be called out to suppress a labor disturbance.

For this state of affairs the Board gave credit to both employers and labor for willingness to compromise and keep agreements.⁹

Labor Law Changes

Yet labor's drive for organization and higher wages and its free use of strikes, particularly the sit down variety, alarmed some people. While low wages and lack of union recognition were real grievances, the feeling grew in some quarters that labor was misusing its newly gained power.

Toward the end of the 1930s, reaction came in several states. In Wisconsin some creamery workers organized in 1938 and some strikes occurred in canneries. This caused farmers concern and led them to combine with business groups to elect a legislature and governor that would restrict some union activities.

Democrats and Republicans joined in 1938 to replace Governor Phillip F. La Follette with Julius P. Heil, Milwaukee industrialist. Labor bills were soon before the legislature.

The most important of these was the "Employment Peace Act." This stated that in labor disputes

there are three major interests involved, namely: That of the public, the employe and the employer. These three interests are to a considerable extent interrelated. It is the policy of the state to protect and promote each of these interests with due regard to the situation and to the rights of the others.

The law provided for collective bargaining, but changed the condi-



CIO News photo

**Charles Schultz, President
Wisconsin CIO**

tions. Employers couldn't deal with the representatives of less than a majority of the employees in a collective bargaining unit. Employers further couldn't make union shop agreements unless three-fourths of the employees in the unit approved in a secret ballot. Union dues couldn't be deducted from pay checks unless the employee granted permission for such action in writing.

Certain unfair employee practices were listed. Workers couldn't be forced to join unions. Sit down strikes were outlawed. Mass picketing was illegal. Picketing and boycotting unless a majority of the bargaining unit had approved a strike was illegal. Secondary boycotts were ruled out. In addition, unions had to present annual financial reports to each member. To handle labor disputes a 3 member Employment Rela-

tions Board replaced the Labor Relations Board.

The bill's supporters said it would make unions more democratic by giving members a greater voice in union affairs. They contended also that it would make labor unions responsible organizations.

The Wisconsin CIO council and the WSFL felt the bill was too restrictive and worked to defeat it. Labor representatives were unsuccessful, however. The bill became law and has remained a part of the Wisconsin statutes.¹⁰

The War and After

With the coming of war to Europe and then to the United States, employment and production reached record levels and labor peace returned. Labor unions pledged full support to defense and war measures. Although labor would insist on its fundamental rights, said AFL President William Green, it would do all it could to avoid strikes.

Wisconsin labor went along with that. One serious strike occurred at the Allis-Chalmers plant in 1941, but generally the picture was one of little disturbance and over-the-top production throughout the period of preparation and war.

The fighting had scarcely ended, however, when harmony disappeared. Removal of price restrictions brought a spiraling cost of living. Strikes to raise wages resulted. Over the country, oilworkers, machinists, lumberjacks, shipyard workers, coal miners, auto and steel workers and many others walked out. By early 1946 nearly 2 million union leaders were on strike.¹¹



Strike scene, Allis-Chalmers West Allis plant, 1941

The issue of communists in labor unions loomed large and caused deep concern. Many unions went through bitter periods of strife in ridding themselves of communist members and influence. The struggle for control between anti- and pro-communist elements in the Wisconsin CIO is a good example.

The AFL wasn't bothered by communists, but in the early days of the CIO a number of party members achieved responsible posts in that organization. Their union experience and ability to organize locals and lead strikes were valuable assets to a labor organization struggling to get started. There weren't many of them and few unions were affected, but in some groups communists gradually took over leadership and control. In

Wisconsin, communists were particularly active in the Allis-Chalmers local number 248 and in the state CIO council.

At the time of the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939-41, through strikes and agitation the few communist labor leaders did all they could to obstruct the flow of war materials to Britain and France. "The Yanks are not coming," they proclaimed.

Then, when Germany invaded Russia in 1941, domestic communists did a quick flip-flop and shouted that the Yanks were coming after all. Non-communist union members became suspicious. It was apparent that communists were more interested in furthering the party than they were in straight trade union activity.

In Wisconsin after the war certain anti-communist labor leaders determined to rid the CIO of foreign influence. Walter Cappel, business agent for CIO locals in Milwaukee, rallied anti-communist support for a showdown at the 1946 annual convention at Wausau. Main problem was to oust Robert Buse, state council president and Mel Heinritz, secretary-treasurer.

A bitter fight developed on the convention floor. "The turmoil and confusion which took place for several hours" there was compared by one reporter to "a large arena into which scores of Kilkenny cats and vicious bulldogs had been thrown together. The snarling reached the stage where a single misstep by a delegate would have resulted in wholesale fistfighting." Tense, over-eager right wing delegates, said the reporter, "acted more undemocratically than the left wingers, yelling and screaming for points of order, and refusing to let the opposition speak."

Finally anti-communist delegates calmed down and stuck to parliamentary rules to defeat their opponents. Delaying tactics of communist leaders were overcome and a vote for officers taken. Right-wing delegates elected their men. Herman Steffes of Milwaukee became president. Malcolm Lloyd, La Crosse, was elected vice president and John Sorenson, West Allis, was named secretary-treasurer. Anti-communists also captured a majority of the 22 member governing board. No other business was conducted at the Wausau convention, but the Wisconsin CIO was rid of communist leadership.



George Haberman, President
WSFL, 1944-

Next year, at Milwaukee, right wing delegates went a step further. They won a rules change which reduced the governing board to 11 members, to be elected from the convention floor rather than by individual unions. As a result, anti-communists were placed in all board positions and Steffes was reelected president.¹²

The Wisconsin CIO action preceded strong anti-communist drives in other states and on the national CIO level. Many unions didn't move fast enough in that direction to suit some members of Congress and much of the public, however.

The communist issue, as well as widespread strikes during 1946 brought demands for stricter governmental control of labor unions. The Taft-Hartley Act, passed over President Truman's veto in 1947, was the result. This law was much the same as the 1939 Wisconsin Peace Employ-

ment Act, and dealt also with communists and union political contributions and activity. Although labor leaders bitterly protested and condemned the law, and worked for its repeal, it remained on the books.¹³

The issue of labor's political activity came under consideration in Wisconsin a few years later. The 1955 legislature passed the Catlin Act, which prohibited unions from contributing money to candidates for public office. Wisconsin labor fought this law as it had the Taft-Hartley Act, unsuccessfully.¹⁴

In spite of restrictive laws union growth and influence didn't diminish. Then in the early 1950s work began to put the CIO and the AFL together into one large union. A number of conferences were held in 1952 and some of the differences between the two groups were ironed out. A lot of work remained after that on both the national and state level before the two largest representatives of American labor could finally unite.¹⁵

Summary

Over the years the Wisconsin labor story has been much the same as that of the entire nation. Similar battles were fought for union recognition, higher wages, favorable laws and other labor goals as took place in other states.

In many respects, however, the Wisconsin record is unique. Since 1900, state labor groups have been more active politically than those in many parts of the country and have achieved many important laws. In gaining that legislation, Wisconsin labor was aided by a Progressive Republican administration just before

World War I that made the state a leader with an efficient and hard-working Industrial Commission, in vocational education, and in provisions for workmen's compensation.

The late 1920s found Wisconsin one of the first states to outlaw the yellow dog contract and make it stick. During the next decade, the state led the nation with unemployment compensation. At the same time, Wisconsin was among the first of the states to swing government support back to the employer in the late 1930's and enact laws which, their advocates felt, redressed the employer-employee balance.

In the post World War II period, the anti-communist record of the state CIO has been of considerable importance.

Wisconsin has also been outstanding in labor studies and worker education. Work at the University of Wisconsin begun under John R. Commons and carried on by such men as Selig Perlman and Edwin Witte has achieved nationwide recognition. The School for Workers has been foremost in its field.

Of great importance also have been Wisconsin labor leaders. Frank J. Weber—"the grand old man of Wisconsin labor"—was one. In addition, there were Henry Ohl, Jr., who took over from Weber as head of the WSFL, and secretary-treasurers of the organization, Frederick Brockhausen, John J. Handley and William Nagorsne. These men won national reputations for their work. They, among many others, have made Wisconsin's record of great significance in the history of the labor movement.

NOTES

¹ Milwaukee *Sentinel*, May 1-6, 1886; Donald Berthrong, Social Legislation in Wisconsin, 1836-1900. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1951, 311-17.

² Foster R. Dulles, *Labor in America* (New York, 1949), 1-114.

³ Frederick Merk, *Economic History of Wisconsin During the Civil War Decade* (Madison, 1916), 158-86.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 178-86; Dulles, *Labor in America*, 126-50.

⁵ Dulles, *Labor in America*, 150-84; Frederick I. Olson, The Milwaukee Socialists, 1897-1941. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University, 1952, 1-166; Bayrd Still, *Milwaukee, The History of a City* (Madison, 1948), 279-321; Edwin E. Witte, "Labor in Wisconsin History," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 35:83-86, 137-42 (Autumn, 1951); *Wisconsin Labor* (Wisconsin State Federation of Labor annual, 1924), n.p.

⁶ Witte, "Labor in Wisconsin History," 137-39; Gordon M. Haferbecker, Wisconsin Labor Legislation. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1952, 80-161, 214-58; William F. Rasche, "Wisconsin Advances in Vocational-Technical Education," *Wisconsin Labor* (1954), 19, 21-29; Wisconsin State Federation of Labor *Proceedings*, 1914-1920; Madison *Wisconsin State Journal*, October 9, 1947.

⁷ Dulles, *Labor in America*, 224-64; Scott D. Johnston, "Wisconsin Socialists and the Conference for Progressive Political Action," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 37:96-103 (Winter, 1953-54); George Woems, "Labor School Began in 1935," [*sic*] *Wisconsin Labor* (1953), 41-42.

⁸ Dulles, *Labor in America*, 264-312; Haferbecker, Wisconsin Labor Legislation, 303-72; James L. Fitzpatrick, "The American Federation of Teachers," *Wisconsin Labor* (1951), 83, 91-92; Dick Donaldson, History of AFSCME. Unpublished manuscript, 1954, in the possession of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, Madison.

⁹ Wisconsin Labor Relations Board, "Report Covering the Period From April 27, 1937 to November 30, 1938" (mineographed, Madison, 1938).

¹⁰ Haferbecker, Wisconsin Labor Legislation, 426-62; Joseph Padway, "Labor's Rights," *Wisconsin Labor* (1940), 39-43.

¹¹ William Green, "Labor's Obligation," reprinted from *American Federationist* in *Wisconsin Labor* (1941), 91; William Nagorsne, "Labor's Contribution to the War Effort," *Wisconsin Labor* (1944), 15-16, 41; Dulles, *Labor in America*, 332-76.

¹² Milwaukee *Journal*, December 13-16, 1946, December 5-7, 1947; Madison *Capital Times*, December 12-16, 19, 1946, December 5-7, 1947.

¹³ Dulles, *Labor in America*, 373-76.

¹⁴ *Laws of Wisconsin*, 1955, Chapter 135.

¹⁵ George Meany, "Labor Unity Achieved," *Wisconsin Labor* (1955), 9-10.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

General works on the labor movement in the United States are, Foster R. Dulles, *Labor in America* (New York, 1949); and John R. Commons, *et al*, *The History of Labor in the United States* (4 vols., New York, 1918-35), to which a fifth volume bringing the story up to date will be added; and Florence Peterson, *American Labor Union*, (New York, 1945).

CHRONICLES OF WISCONSIN



Pamphlet Titles

1. Wisconsin, Land of Frenchmen, Indians and the Beaver
2. The British Leave Wisconsin, The War of 1812
3. The Wisconsin Lead Region, Frontier Community
4. Wisconsin Grows to Statehood, Immigration and Internal Improvements
5. Wisconsin Defies the Fugitive Slave Law, The Case of Sherman M. Booth
6. The Civil War of Private Cooke, A Wisconsin Boy in the Union Army
7. Wisconsin Agriculture, The Rise of the Dairy Cow
8. Farm Machinery in Wisconsin
9. The Wisconsin Pineries, Logging on the Chippewa
10. Farming the Cutover, The Settlement of Northern Wisconsin
11. Robert M. La Follette and Wisconsin Progressivism
12. Wisconsin Women Fight For Suffrage
13. Cutover Problems, Colonization, Depression, Reforestation
14. Wisconsin Meets the Great Depression
15. The Wisconsin Pulp and Paper Industry
16. The Wisconsin Labor Story

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA
977.5W75CHR C001 V016
CHRONICLES OF WISCONSIN. MADISON



3 0112 025402030

